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PP RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHDF RUEHIK RUEHLH RUEHLN
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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9796

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3051

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0866

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0740

RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1316

RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 1955

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001298

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: ELECTION OFFICIALS CONFIDENT IN
THEIR PROCESS, BUT PROCESS STILL ARCAN

REF: ASHGABAT 1274

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Poloffs met November 27 with Myrat Garryev, longtime chairman of the National Central Election Commission, and Shirin Akhmedova, the Director of the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, to assess the status of preparations for the December 9 provincial People's Council elections, and identify areas where the election process is changing. Akhmedova indicated that the Institute wants to ensure that more Central Election Commission members at all governmental levels receive more training in advance of the more significant Mejlis elections scheduled for December 2008 in order to bring Turkmen election officials closer to international election standards. She admitted that Turkmenistan's election law is in need of reform, but added that the current law should be evaluated in action before making changes. The Institute, however, intends to work with experts from ABA/CEELI, USAID, ICNL and others to assess areas of reform and develop a plan to do so. Although both officials offered strong statements indicating that democracy is thriving in Turkmenistan, the conduct of elections -- especially this early in President Berdimuhamedov's term -- is not likely to be different from those conducted under Niyazov. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (SBU) Poloffs met with Central Election Commission Chairman Myrat Garryev on November 27 at the Central Election Commission's headquarters. Garryev, a boisterous, white-haired Brezhnev look-alike, had also invited most of the rest of the commission to witness the discussion with US diplomats. It was difficult to believe that this flirtatious old man had once been one of Niyazov's most important sycophants, and is credited with being one of two men (the other being Turkmenistan Democratic Party Chair Musayev) who had proposed that President Niyazov be declared "President for Life." Garryev stated, without a smile on his face, that the provincial elections on December 9 would be an example of "democracy on the highest level," since democracy had been developed by the Turkmen people 5,000 years ago when they

elected Oguz Khan their tribal leader.

¶4. (SBU) After a review of the applicable electoral legislation (reftel), Garryev answered questions about what has -- and has not -- changed about the balloting process. He noted that there is a big focus on assuring that every single registered voter in each precinct has voted. New voters who have turned 18 are given gifts and flowers upon arrival to a polling site (a practice not uncommon in other parts of the FSU). The oldest voters are driven to the polls, and mobile ballot boxes are brought to invalids who are incapable of going to the polling site. The day is treated like a holiday, and nearly every polling site will still have music, dancing girls, and possibly even food to make the day festive. Garryev declared with confidence that, with these incentives, more than 60 percent of registered voters will have voted by 2 o'clock in the afternoon.

¶5. (SBU) Ballots will have the names of two to four candidates listed, and voters will be required to cross out all but one name -- their chosen candidate. If a ballot is received that has had all names crossed out, it is still a legitimately cast ballot (but it is unclear if these are counted). Garryev claimed to have never seen a ballot that showed the voter did not want to choose any of the possible candidates. Domestic election observers, recently trained on international monitoring standards by the OSCE Center in Ashgabat, will be participating in the actual vote counting at the precinct level. (NOTE: Of the 100 Turkmen citizens the OSCE trained for election monitoring, 10 were from the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, and the remaining 190 were from associations, trade unions, the Democratic Party, and other government-affiliated entities around the

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country. END NOTE.)

¶6. (SBU) When asked about the July 2007 amendments that reversed an earlier effort to expand the powers of provincial government (reftel), Garryev was frank. He said, "Life moves on. Niyazov passed away. It doesn't mean we have to stay with him. Turkmenistan is undergoing a renaissance. We no longer fulfill the wish of one person. It was the Mejlis's wish to change the law, and its members represent the people."

¶7. (SBU) Shirin Ahmedova of the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights focused her comments on the variety of training and cooperation in which the Institute has already participated. (NOTE: The Institute is a primary source for participants in OSCE and UNDP training on election-related issues. END NOTE.) She indicated that the Institute wants to ensure that more Central Election Commission members at all governmental levels receive more training in advance of the more significant Mejlis elections scheduled for December 2008 in order to bring Turkmen election officials closer to international election standards. She admitted that Turkmenistan's election law is in need of reform, but added that the current law should be evaluated in action before making changes. The Institute, however, intends to work with experts from ABA/CEELI, USAID, ICNL and others to assess areas of reform and develop a plan to do so.

¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: Government officials are citing their close cooperation with international organizations and embassies to promote positive change in the system, but little change is going to be apparent on December 9. The road to electoral reform will likely be long and bumpy. END COMMENT.

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